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Nicaragua's Indians: Ragtag Army

The 150,000 Indians who inhabit the swamps and jungles along Nicaragua's Atlantic coast are caught in a tangle of overlapping animosities. As a persecuted minority, they first helped the Sandinistas overthrow the right-wing dictatorship of the Anastasio Somoza. Now they are fighting alongside the remnants of Somoza's National Guard to overthrow the left-wing dictatorship of the Sandinistas.

For this latter campaign, the Indians formed a guerrilla force of 2,000 or so known as MISURA—named for the Miskito, Sumo and Rama tribes. They fought with what arms they could cadge from the CIA after the CIA-favored contras had taken their pick.

This ragtag army is now caught in a circle of futility. Supplies have evaporated since CIA funding was blocked by Congress. This has caused morale to sag. Tribal animosities are also resurging, and the guerrillas are bedeviled by the oppressive rainy season.

Meanwhile, two Indian leaders, Brooklyn Rivera and Steadman Fagoth, have suddenly found themselves being interviewed by U.S. reporters who have just discovered a "split" between the two. Their latest rhetorical dustup—including Rivera's charge that Fagoth had him kicked out of Honduras and Fagoth's charge that Rivera was selling out to the Sandinistas—reflects, if anything, the difficulty in making sense out of the Nicaraguan situation.

The Indians turned against the Sandinista regime when it sought to exert authority over the tribes. Then followed military suppression, forced removal of Indian villagers and the flight of thousands into Honduras and Costa Rica.

Rivera made his headquarters in Costa Rica, where he allied his guerrillas with Eden Pastora, the renegade Sandinista hero. Both Rivera and Pastora have shown a certain willingness to end the bloodshed by compromise; they are willing to negotiate a peaceful settlement with the Managua regime.

But Fagoth's guerrillas are based in Honduras and are allied with the CIA-backed contras. Among the contras are many former members of Somoza's National Guard. For this and other reasons, the contras will accept nothing less than the overthrow of the Sandinista regime. Fagoth takes the same hard line. He may also have his own private agenda. The contras' military chief, Enrique Bermudez, told my associate last summer that his intelligence service had stolen a document from Fagoth that outlined his grandiose plan to set up an independent Miskito Indian republic—with himself as its leader.

Fagoth is also embroiled in a running dispute with the international relief workers from World Relief who are distributing food to the Indian refugees in Honduras. They say many Miskitos would like to return to Nicaragua in response to a Sandinista amnesty offer.

But Fagoth needs the refugees. Their wretched camps are a source of recruits for his little army. Their presence also justifies his continued resistance. For these reasons, the relief workers allege, many of the 17,000 refugees in Honduras have been prevented forcibly by Fagoth's men from going home.

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